

# What is the European Union?

The European Union, or EU, is a collaborative effort between 27 European countries to form a mutually beneficial economic and policy community. Since 1993, the EU has worked to increase economies and spread [human rights](#) advances worldwide. The goals of the European Union include uniting Europe toward common goals and providing aid to developing nations.

After World War II, Europe was a fractured area, divided by political and cultural differences. Several attempts to promote a regional governing body met with varying success, including the European Coal and Steel Community and the [European Community](#). Because of the power ideological and political differences between Western and Eastern Europe, a true community could not be formed until after the end of the [Cold War](#).

In 1992, the [Maastricht Treaty](#) was signed by member nations, bringing the European Union into effect. The treaty outlined three pillars of the union: European Communities, Common Foreign and Security Policy, and Justice and Home Affairs. The treaty also made provisions to admit many of the nations of Eastern Europe. In 2001, the Treaty of Nice further expanded provisions for new nations.

To become a member of the European Union, a nation must be in conformance with a series of standards called the Copenhagen criteria. These detail geographic and political necessities for member nations. Included standards dictate human rights laws, democracy, protective law for minorities, and a market economy. As of 2008, three states are candidates undergoing review: Turkey, Croatia, and the Republic of Macedonia. Several other nations are identified as potential candidates for future admission, including [Albania](#) and Serbia.

One of the greatest achievements of the European Union is the establishment of a single market economy. Between member nations, trade is largely unrestricted. While nations maintain separate laws on taxation and trade standards, EU members agree to basic trade laws between their countries. Almost all products created by one nation are legal for trade in all of the other countries.



Most nations belonging to the EU have adopted a common currency, called the Euro. The Euro is overseen by the European **Central Bank**, in an effort to promote all economies that incorporate the use of the currency. As of 2008, 15 nations use the Euro, collectively called the **Eurozone**. Other EU members must meet specific financial and economic standards before being allowed to adopt the currency. Slovenia was the first of the countries from the 2004 expansion to meet euro criteria.

In addition to increasing **economic stability**, the European Union sets member policy on a variety of social and political issues. Agriculture, energy policy, anti-**terrorism** efforts, environmental issues, and education are among the serious areas covered by various EU committees. The EU's goal of creating a neighborhood community of nations is still in its infancy, but measurable impacts are already apparent in the economic and social arenas.